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ABSTRACT

This paper reports on exploratory studies to determine whether sex differences in the attribution process are operative among first-level management positions. Studies were conducted within several organizations using similar procedures in each. First-level management males and females, matched as closely as possible, were asked to describe an occasion on which they felt they had been most successful and an occasion on which they felt they had been least successful. For each situation the managers were asked to rate the importance to the outcome of a number of causes: ability, effort, ease or difficulty of the task, and luck. In addition, these persons were asked to evaluate themselves on a number of characteristics relevant to their job performance and to complete a questionnaire measuring job satisfaction. Results indicated that the patterns of male and female managers showed a surprisingly high degree of similarity, giving weight to the argument that males and females in equivalent positions are more similar than different. Ability differences occured between the two groups, with males consistently rating their performance and ability higher and attributing success more to their ability. For the female managers, estimates of ability were significantly linked to self-estimated physical attractiveness and to their perceived relationship with their supervisors. Attitudinal differences between young and older management women were also noted. (Author/PC)

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Women in Management: Causal Explanations of Performance

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The increasing entry of women into organizational settings, given impetus by EEOC and Title VII rulings, has created a rapidly-expanding population of professional women. Women are more frequently being tapped for management-level positions, and while the number of women at the top management levels is still quite small, the percentage of women in first-level management positions is growing rapidly.

While these increasing numbers are encouraging, it is important for investigators concerned with the role of women in organizations to look beyond simple entrance figures. Promoting women to management-level positions may in itself be insufficient to insure long-range objectives of equality. Many of the factors which in the past have served to minimize women's entrance into management level positions (cf. O'Leary, in press, for a comprehensive review of these factors) may continue to operate, inhibiting the further development of the woman who has attained a first-level management position. This statement may hold especially true to the extent that upper management feels pressured to promote women into management-level positions that have not previously been considered appropriate for women.

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At least two general processes may contribute to an ineffective utilization of women in the management setting. On the one hand, the organization may demonstrate discrimination against the female employee. Considerable research within both social and organizational psychology has shown that men and women are viewed differently, and in nearly all cases, the biases are in favor of the male. Females are seen as possessing less desirable characteristics for a managerial position (Broverman et al., 1972; Schein, 1973; Bowman et al., 1965; Bass et al., 1971), and the performance of a woman is rated less favorably than an equivalent performance by a man (Deaux & Taynor, 1973; Pheterson et al., 1971; Goldberg, 1968). Furthermore, the reasons given for a man's successful performance frequently differ from those given for the woman's success. Research has shown that while an observer will attribute a man's successful performance to his innate ability, the woman's success is more likely to be viewed as the result of chance or the simplicity of the task (Deaux & Emswiller, 1974; Feather & Simon, in press; Terborg & Ilgen, in press). Other evidence of treatment discrimination is provided by Terborg and Ilgen (in press) who found that simulated employers assigned women engineers to more routine tasks while assigning the equivalent man to the more challenging duties. While entrance level salaries are by force of law becoming equivalent for the man and woman, these more subtle forms of evaluation discrimination may have a considerable effect on the success of the women in a management position.

A second set of factors which may perpetuate inequality within the organizational setting are those characteristics of the woman herself. While recently popular concepts such as fear of success (Horner, 1972)

have emphasized potential inhibitory factors, relatively little attention has been given within the organizational setting to factors within the woman herself. (The work of Hall, 1972; Hall & Gordon, 1973; and Jeanne Herman's paper in this session dealing with role conflict are important exceptions.)

Our own research within a laboratory setting has suggested that men and women evaluate their own performance quite differently. This research has generally been based on an attibution model, which seeks to determine the nature of explanations which individuals offer for their own success and failure, and how these explanations may affect subsequent expectations and performance. Research within this framework has shown that males tend to credit their success to ability (Deaux & Farris, 1974), while females show a greater tendency to use luck as an explanation for either success or failure (Deaux & Farris, 1974; Bar-Tal & Frieze, 1974). Other evidence suggests that while women are still reluctant to claim ability (a stable, internal characteristic), they may invoke effort (a temporary but internal characteristic) to explain success (Bar-Tal & Frieze, 1974). Phrased another way, women use relatively less internal reasons to explain success than do men and, again relative to men, use more temporary than permanent explanations.

These differing explanations are important because of their potential influence on future behavior. Attribution theory (cf. Weiner et al., 1971) assumes that expectations for future success relate to the stability of the causal explanation. Thus, if a person's performance is explained by ability, then either that person or an observer should have reason to expect that the performance could be repeated again in the future.

Conversely, if luck or other unstable factors are seen as causal, there is no reason to believe that the performance will be repeated.

If women in a management setting show evidence of these differing, and generally inhibiting attributional patterns, their progress within the organization could be held back by their own failure to take credit for success. Yet while the predictions from the laboratory studies are fairly straightforward, there are reasons to doubt that they would generalize to the professional woman in an organizational setting. Virtually all of the studies discussed have been conducted with random samples of college students, and in general the tasks have been fairly simple ones such as anagram solutions. The business setting, in contrast, presents a much more important and consuming performance situation where such simple attributions may not be central. Furthermore, women and men within the organization are not randomly chosen, but have instead selected themselves into a competitive situation and may not be similar to the larger population.

During the past year, we have conducted some exploratory studies to determine whether sex differences in attribution process are operative among first-level management personnel. Studies were conducted within a number of organizations, and the basic procedure was similar in each case. First-level management males and females, matched as closely as possible given the particular population, were asked to describe an occasion on which they felt they had been most successful and an occasion on which they felt they had been least successful. For each situation, the managers were asked to rate the importance to the outcome of a number of causes: ability, effort, ease or difficulty of the task,

and luck. In addition, these management persons were asked to evaluate themselves on a number of characteristics relevant to their job performance, and to complete a questionnaire measuring job satisfaction (Smith, Kendall, & Hulin, 1969). To provide supplemental information on possible evaluative bias, supervisors of these managers were asked to rate their employees on a number of job-relevant characteristics.

This presentation will be based on data from two samples.

Sample 1. The first sample consists of 27 males and 25 females who held first-level management positions in a Southern telephone company. Males and females were comparable in terms of age, education level, and number of months employed with the company (see Table 1). Unfortunately, it was not possible to equate the position held, beyond the general classification for first-level management, because of the sex-linked nature of the majority of job classifications. Thus, first-level management females tended to be in the traffic departments, whereas first-level management males were more likely to be in maintenance and installation departments.

Sample 2. The second sample consists of 25 females and 30 males who held supervisory positions in a California retail chain store. Males and females were comparable in terms of age, education level, length of time employed with the company, and length of time in current position (see Table 1). In this case, the positions of the males and females were essentially the same, being the head of a department within the store.

The data obtained from these samples will be discussed under four separate headings: (1) General self-evaluations; (2) Causal attributions for success; (3) Evaluations by supervisors; and (4) Measures of job satisfaction.

(1) General self-evaluations

Managers were asked to compare themselves to other people holding similar positions within the company on a number of job-related characteristics, such as ability, motivation, initiative, difficulty of assignments, and relationship with supervisor. Because only the second sample had males and females in identical job classifications, only the results from this sample are presented. Males saw themselves as having a significantly better overall performance than did females ($F = 8.38$, $p = .006$) and as having significantly more ability ($F = 6.52$, $p = .01$). In addition, men saw themselves as having significantly more difficult jobs than did females ($F = 8.49$, $p = .005$). Males and females did not judge themselves differently on other characteristics such as effort, friendliness, physical attractiveness, approval or criticism received. Men did, however, report a significantly better relationship with their supervisor ($F = 4.38$, $p = .04$).

(2) Causal attributions for success

The mean attributions to the four factors of interest for each subject sample are shown in Table 2. It should be noted that subjects defined their own occasion for success, and it is quite possible that these could vary substantially. In fact, we plan to try to do some form of content analysis on the selected incidents at a later point. As can be seen, however, ability again differentiated male and female managers. In both samples, males claimed ability was more responsible for their success than did females ($p < .05$ in each case). Luck, effort, and task difficulty were not differentially used by males and females. Both sexes used ability and effort far more than task ease or luck, as would seem reasonable within the business context, but the relative use of effort vs. ability was greater for females than males.

(3) Evaluations by supervisors

Ratings by the supervisors of these personnel showed very little difference between males and females, minimizing the potential of discrimination as a factor. Male and female managers were rated equally on overall performance, ability, motivation, initiative, and ability to accept praise or criticism. In the Florida sample, the only characteristic on which supervisors rated females and males differently was moodiness, seeing females as moodier, suggesting some remnants of the female stereotype may still be operative. For the California sample, supervisors reported males as friendlier ($F = 7.28$, $p = .01$) and as having a better relation with them as supervisors ($F = 5.21$, $p = .03$). (It should be noted that in both samples, virtually all of the supervisors were male.) In addition, supervisors of the second sample reported that males had more difficult assignments than females ($F = 4.03$, $p = .05$).

(4) Measures of Job Satisfaction

Job satisfaction measures showed few consistent differences between male and female management personnel (see Table 3). If anything, they testify to the variation among organizations and a similarity between males and females in similar positions. Whereas the women in the Florida sample were significantly less satisfied with promotion than men ($p = .05$), the direction of this difference was opposite, though not significant, for the California sample. (Additional data collected from three other retail chain store locations shows females more satisfied with promotions than men in one case, and less satisfied in two cases.) Similarly, sex differences in satisfaction with supervision show reversals between the two samples.

General Observations

The patterns of male and female managers in the samples studied show a surprisingly high degree of similarity in most respects, and give weight to the argument that males and females in equivalent positions are more similar than different. Additionally, the supervisors sampled showed a similar balance in their judgments of their first-level personnel, suggesting that at this level at least, bias is not pronounced.

In two areas, however, there are consistent differences between males and females, and these take on somewhat more importance given the background of other similarities. In addition, these differences are consistent with previous research in a laboratory setting. Males consistently rate their performance and their ability as higher, and attribute their success more to their ability.

Correlational data also showed different relationships for males and females where ability was concerned. For the female manager, estimates of ability were significantly ($p < .01$) linked to the self-estimated physical attractiveness and to their perceived relationship with their supervisor. For males these same correlations approximated zero. While the direction of causality cannot be determined, it seems that for the women managers, ability, attractiveness, and good relationship with superiors are a covarying package, whereas for men these judgments are essentially independent of each other.

Women in the California sample of retail store managers felt their jobs were relatively easier than did men, and the judgments of their supervisors corroborated this judgment. While it is possible that these judgments represent an attributional bias, discussion with company personnel suggests that the difference may be based in reality. In the past,

men within the company have tended to get the more challenging assignments, a situation which would affirm the results of Terborg and Ilgen's (in press) findings with simulated employers.

Perhaps mention should be made of another finding from the data accumulated in this series of investigations. A number of samples which were collected have not been reported here, primarily because the males and females differed significantly on a variety of dimensions, including age, education and length of time employed. As might be expected, women in similar positions tended to be older, less educated, and had been employed with the company and had held the specific position for a greater period of time than had the male. However, a number of correlational analyses have been performed on this larger data pool, and some interesting relationships have emerged. While the range of education and age are similar for the males and females, it is only for the latter group that these demographic variables are predictive of job satisfaction and self-evaluation. Younger and more educated women have substantially higher estimates of their performance and ability than do older women, and they are reliably less satisfied with supervision, promotions, work and pay. For males, these relationships between age, education, and job variables tend to be inconsequential. These data would suggest that in some ways females are a more heterogeneous group of managers than are females, and that further, there is a new breed of woman developing for whom some of the earlier findings may not be applicable. Unlike her older counterpart, the young management woman is less likely to minimize her own abilities, and is less likely to be content with job conditions which may have satisfied her predecessors.

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Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Management Samples

	N	Age	No. Months Employed
Florida sample			
Males	27	39.56	104.27
Females	25	40.12	113.16
California sample			
Males	30	34.57	101.83
Females	25	38.12	98.20

Table 2

Attributions of Causality for Success

	Florida		California	
	Males	Females	Males	Females
Ability	7.89	7.00	8.33	7.59
Good Luck	3.18	3.43	3.76	4.00
Effort	8.18	7.74	8.37	8.12
Easy Task	2.78	2.00	2.28	2.98

Table 3

Measures of Job Satisfaction

	Work	Supervision	Pay	Promotions	Co-workers
Florida sample					
Males	36.00	37.89	28.08	34.32	39.26
Females	37.68	44.00	33.36	25.20	42.36
	(.51)	(.15)	(.09)	(.05)	(.65)
California sample					
Males	34.00	42.93	24.59	30.92	43.50
Females	35.54	37.00	21.25	37.92	48.42
	(.56)	(.09)	(.61)	(.11)	(.08)

Note: Numbers in parentheses represent p-values of comparisons